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Shakespeare’s Use of Foils in Othello

In Othello, Shakespeare promotes the theme that society imposes unfair expectations upon women by using foiled characters. The main character Desdemona and minor character Emilia pit passivity against action, naivety against cynicism, and love against convenience during their interactions. The two women illustrate the extremes that women reached in an attempt to flourish in a condescending Venecian society.

A central difference between Desdemona and Emilia is the amount of impetus it takes for them to act. Desdemona never confronts or risk offending the males around her, and only pleads with Othello, never acting definitely. In contrast, Emilia actively advocates in her own favor, and does not avoid confrontation. She is quick to take up Othello's handkerchief and bring it to Iago, all the while aware and willing to take responsibility for her actions. Emilia also demonstrates her inclination towards action when she confronts Iago at the end of the play, and essentially forfeits her life for the sake of truth. The use of two such different characters highlights the extremes to which women were driven to in a society which held double standards for the sexes. Desdemona is the meek wife, hardly willing to speak a word even to save her life; which Emilia seems to relish her part in the unfolding drama, and ultimately exposes the chief villain. Unfair expectations forced these women to such extremes.

Desdemona and Emilia differ not only in their ability to act, but in their views on the world. Desdemona's naivety conflicts with her servant Emilia's cynicism. The former reminisces of her love for Othello, idly asking if there are women who really do cheat on their husbands, and asserting that she never would. Emilia responds that for all the treasures in the world, she would be very willing to compromise her marriage. The romantic and realist foil each other in this instance, and though the two women occupy similar places in society, their interpretation of the world is drastically different. Desdemona maintains unto her death that Othello is incapable of jealousy, a high praise for a man she really only knows through his hero stories. Emilia is more skeptical, and attempts to warn her mistress, but to no avail. Both women's views are a result of the society's unfair expectations for them. Desdemona's meek naivety is a classic demonstration of what a woman "should be," as she is passed from her father's controls, to her husbands; while Emilia's cynical nature demonstrates how an intelligent woman could cope with the society's double standard.

The final matter in which Desdemona and Emilia differ is their approach to the tradition of marriage. There is somewhat of a role reversal in this area. Desdemona is the less traditional, order-bound, of the two. She has an affair with and marries a Moor, doing so without her father's consent. In addition, her relationship with Othello is hardly conventional, as the pair barely know each other and are in awe of the idea of a spouse, but not in the actual existence of one. Emilia is the more traditional character in such a sense. Her marriage to Iago is obviously one of convenience rather than love. She and her husband use each other to further their own goals, and under the semblance of marriage they play a power game. This fact demonstrates that Emilia is aware of society’s expectations, and has found an acceptable way to maintain her freedom while satisfying tradition. In contrast, Desdemona’s willingness to fling her father away, along with tradition, indicates that she is either very unintelligent of is attempting to defy society’s expectations, by marrying for “love” rather than convenience. Both women’s views on tradition reflect upon the society they dwell in.

Shakespeare incorporates foils into his work in order to highlight its theme. In Othello, he uses Desdemona’s and Emilia’s contrasting dispositions to demonstrate the unfair nature of Shakespearian society’s expectations of women. The two characters’ differing levels of activity, idealism, and adherence to tradition highlight this underlying theme in Othello.